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For the Wrongly Convicted, New Trials Once the Cell Opens

By SHARON WAXMAN

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PARK CITY, Utah, Jan. 24 - This month marks one year since Nick Yarris was released from prison after having spent 23 years behind bars, many of them in solitary confinement and on death row, for a murder he did not commit.

DNA testing proved his innocence. Upon his release, he was given no money, no housing, no training, no therapy. And no apology.

But he is not an angry or bitter man. In fact, Mr. Yarris, 43, is remarkably composed and articulate in discussing his fate and that of others who have been released after wrongful conviction. They are featured in a new documentary, "[After Innocence](#)," at the Sundance Film Festival, where viewers leaped to their feet, many in tears, at the end of the first screening on Saturday.

"What were my choices?" he said after seeing the film for the first time, when asked how he could seem so sane. "I could, A) be really devastated and angry and let them continue to own me, or B) I could have fun. B sounds better."

He continued: "I realized at some point that everyone in my family was waiting for me, hoping for me. The lowest insult would be if I came out destroyed, a broken man, bitter and angry. And it was survival. My survival technique was to become a good man."

For all his eloquence, Mr. Yarris is far from on solid ground. He still has no job, no permanent home and no money. Still, he is in much better condition emotionally than many of the other exonerees featured in the film, all of whom were released, often after years of struggling to get DNA testing in their cases, with no amends by the state.

(More than a dozen states have passed laws providing compensation for convicts who

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Jessica Sanders, director and screenwriter of "After Innocence," at the Sundance Film Festival in Utah with Nick Yarris one of the freed inmates whose stories are told in the film.

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are later exonerated, though most of the men in the film, including Mr. Yarris, who is from Pennsylvania, are from states that have none.)

Jessica Sanders, the film's director as well as its co-producer and screenwriter, met 30 exonerees at a conference in 2002. "I was so moved by the stories of these men, and shocked that nothing was being done for them," she said. "I knew that a film had to be made."

Showtime developed the project, though the producers are also seeking a theatrical distributor.

Ms. Sanders was introduced to the men through the film's co-producer and writer, Marc Simon, who as a law student volunteered at the Innocence Project, a nonprofit group run by Barry C. Scheck and Peter J. Neufeld that focuses on freeing the innocent, frequently through DNA testing.

While that effort continues - the group has helped free more than 150 wrongfully convicted inmates in the last 13 years - there has been little attention to what happens to the men after their release. Some depend on welfare and on their already burdened families.

"Without their families, these guys would be homeless," Mr. Simon said.

Wilton Dedge, a soft-spoken, blond-haired man, was released five months ago after serving 22 years in prison in Florida for sexual battery and burglary. In 2001, DNA tests of a hair, a central piece of material evidence in his conviction, proved it was not his, but the prosecution continued to fight to keep him in jail. More advanced DNA testing of semen won his release last year.

"If the state had their way, I'd still be in jail," Mr. Dedge said quietly, nursing a beer at the post-screening lunch. "They don't want to admit they messed up."

Mr. Dedge learned welding in prison and since his release has found some part-time work for a tree service. "All I got was a basic form letter apologizing for what happened, not admitting they did anything wrong," he said. "But it seemed pretty hollow, after all the names they called me in court. They weren't man enough to step forward and apologize to my face. That disappointed me."

Last October, Mr. Yarris traveled to London to address the British Parliament about the death penalty and his proposal for an economic embargo against Pennsylvania. While there, he met Karen Karbritz, 30. They plan to be married in May, and he hopes to start a new life with her in England.

"I'm going to go, to try my best to have the things I wanted," he said, adding, "I was waiting, hoping for a chance just to live. Now the greatest respect I can have for her for trusting me is by loving her, and to thank her just for holding me."

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